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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRUSSELS 000310

SIPDIS

FOR VICE PRESIDENT BIDEN FROM CHARGE BUSH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/25/2029

TAGS: PREL BE

SUBJECT: YOUR MEETING WITH BELGIAN PRIME MINISTER VAN ROMPUY

Classified By: CDA WAYNE BUSH, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Mr. Vice President, your meeting with Belgian Prime Minister Van Rompuy can reinforce U.S.-Belgian cooperation on Afghanistan, counter-terrorism, resettlement of Guantanamo detainees, Iran, Kosovo and Africa. The meeting is an opportunity to recognize Belgium's expanding contributions to ISAF and encourage more military and development assistance for Afghanistan. It takes place against a backdrop of increasing Belgian concern about the economy. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is among Belgium's top foreign policy priorities and the topic Van Rompuy is most likely to raise. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Herman Van Rompuy took office in December 2008 after his predecessor resigned amid controversy surrounding his efforts to ensure the sale of Belgium's Fortis bank, threatened by the financial crisis, to the French bank BNP Paribas. Van Rompuy has long experience in Belgium's politics, which center on rivalry between the Dutch and French speaking communities. He keeps a low profile and is focused on domestic consensus-building rather than advancing an ambitious agenda. He is a leader of the center-right Flemish Christian Democrat party.

¶3. (C) Afghanistan: Belgium's Defense Minister, Flemish Christian Democrat Pieter De Crem is by contrast an outspoken supporter of a robust Belgian role in NATO who has led Belgium to increase its military efforts in Afghanistan since the 2007 elections -- despite resource limitations and considerable opposition. The Foreign Minister, Flemish Liberal Karel De Gucht, who will join Van Rompuy for the meeting, generally supports Belgium's role in ISAF but is cautious about endangering Belgian troops and relying on the Karzai government, which he views as corrupt. Belgium currently provides four F-16s and support personnel in Kandahar, security forces for the Kabul airport, and a 70-person Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT) which is training in Kabul and will soon deploy to Kunduz. Close to 500 Belgian soldiers are in Afghanistan out of 1200 deployed worldwide. Belgium has provided nearly \$40 million in development assistance to Afghanistan since 2003. The government will soon consider future contributions to Afghanistan; an additional OMLT, sponsorship of a Provincial Reconstruction Team, and increased development assistance may all be on the table. Belgium has also deployed troops to Kosovo, Lebanon, Chad (for Darfur refugees), and the DRC.

¶4. (C) Congo: Belgium's relations with the DRC are back on track after a difficult year resulting from FM De Gucht's criticism of DRC corruption and mismanagement. The Belgians are critical of recent DRC-Rwanda-Uganda coordinated military

action against rebel groups in eastern DRC because of atrocities against civilians committed by the rebel groups in retaliation. The Belgians are concerned about illicit mineral exports from central Africa, which help provide resources for rebel groups. Belgium has provided troops to an EU force in Chad to protect refugees from Darfur, and is sending a frigate to assist in anti-piracy efforts off the coast of Somalia.

¶ 15. (C) Economic Crisis: Belgium's banking system nearly collapsed before the government stepped in last fall to rescue the most important banks. Unemployment is rising, and government officials are concerned that General Motors may close its Opel car plant in Antwerp.

¶ 16. (C) Guantanamo Detainees: Foreign Minister De Gucht has expressed willingness to consider taking some Guantanamo detainees. The government's main concern is whether resettled detainees will pose a security threat. The government also needs a public rationale for why detainees must come to Belgium instead of settling in the U.S. The Belgians are currently awaiting the outcome of U.S.-EU discussions in Washington on this subject later this month before taking further action.

¶ 17. (C) Counter-terrorism: U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies enjoy a close working relationship with Belgian counterparts. This cooperation contributed to the arrest in December 2008 of a group of Belgian terrorists who had traveled to the Pakistan/Afghanistan border region and returned to Belgium, possibly to carry out attacks in Europe. Belgian courts are currently considering a U.S. request to extradite convicted terrorist Nizar Trabelsi, who is incarcerated here for planning attacks on U.S. forces at Kleine-Brogel air base in Belgium and the U.S. Embassy in Paris.

¶ 18. (C) Iran: Belgium shares U.S. concern about Iran. The Belgians strongly prefer a diplomatic solution to military options, and welcome signs that the U.S. is prepared to engage Iran diplomatically. Belgium will support sanctions by the EU and the UN as part of the diplomatic effort, but would rather see existing sanctions applied and targeted more effectively before new and wider sanctions are applied. The Belgians appeared to substantially reduce Iranian financial transactions through Belgian banks when we raised the issue last year. During its 2007-2008 tenure on the UN Security Council, Belgium chaired the Iran sanctions committee and coordinated closely with us.

¶ 19. (C) Europe's East: The Belgians are concerned about Russia's control of much of Europe's gas supply, although Belgium itself gets very little natural gas from Russia. Belgium was among the first nations to recognize the independence of Kosovo. It has approximately 200 troops in KFOR and 40 civilians working with the European Union Rule of Law mission (EULEX).

¶ 10. (C) Middle East: There were major public protests in Brussels against the scale of recent Israeli military action in Gaza. Belgium airlifted Palestinian children burned in the fighting to Brussels for medical treatment. At the beginning of February, FM De Gucht led an effort to ban Belgian exports of arms to "Israel and the occupied territories."

¶ 11. (C) Suggested talking points include:

-- Thank Van Rompuy for Belgium's expanding military contributions to Afghanistan, and urge continued increases in military and development assistance.

-- Express our desire to work closely with the Belgians on Africa, especially resolving conflict in central Africa and addressing the issue of illicit mineral exports which help fuel conflicts. The U.S. and Belgium may not always have identical analyses, but we value Belgium's knowledge, expertise and contributions in the region.

-- Give credit for Belgium's close cooperation with U.S. law enforcement agencies on counter-terrorism.

-- Express appreciation for Belgium's willingness to consider resettling low-risk Guantanamo detainees, and offer to work with the government to accomplish that.

-- Look forward to continued close cooperation with Belgium in international efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation, especially with regard to Iran.

BUSH